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Contras' Passivity Disappoints Backers

Rebel Leaders Blame Shortage of Boots

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TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras— Last August the Nicaraguan rebels known as contras had just staged two successful ambushes, were awash in supplies, and said that their war against the Sandinista government was going their way.

"Come back in six weeks, and we'll have more victories to tell you about," said Frank Arana, spokesman for the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, the largest contra group.

Today, six months later, the contras—or counterrevolutionaries—have little reason to boast. Between 60 and 70 percent of their forces have been staying in base camps in southern Honduras since October, and it is unclear when they will cross back into Nicaragua to continue their war, according to contra sources and other informants.

The rebels' lack of military activity has led to dissatisfaction among many of their U.S. supporters, including some U.S. officials close to the program and some members of Congress who have backed it in the past. Questions have been raised about the contras' ability to wage a guerrilla war, about their willingness to fight, and about the U.S. government's management of \$27 million of nonlethal aid for the rebels.

A well-placed source said that there was "concern" within the U.S. government about the performance of the contras. "The problem is, if the contras won't fight, then what are the alternatives" for dealing with the Sandinistas, the source asked.

From the U.S. government perspective, the contras' poor showing suggests, at best, that they are far from reaching their goal of overthrowing the Sandinistas. At worst, it indicates that they will remain only an irritant to the left-wing government in Managua.

The contras sent up to 10,000 combatants, the bulk of their forces, into Nicaragua in June and July in an effort to stage their first sustained offensive of the year. But a Sandinista counteroffensive in early autumn, backed by increased use of Soviet-made helicopter gunships, cleared most contras out of their old strongholds in the coffee-rich mountains of northern Nicaragua, rebel leaders said.

As a result, the guerrillas have been less successful than a year ago in disrupting the vital coffee harvest, which is coming to an end now, they said.

The contras' only substantial presence currently is in cattle-producing regions in the south-central part of the country, according to the contra officials. Even there, however, they have had only one significant victory since August, an attack that reportedly killed 33 Army reservists at the town of Presillitas on Nov. 10.

The contras have been unable to build an effective clandestine network of supporters inside Nicaragua to deliver supplies to guerrillas in the field, according to contra leaders and other sources. As a result, they must rely on a few aircraft for parachute drops to their forces, the sources said.

One reason for the contras' troubles is the Sandinistas' improved military performance. The Sandinista Popular Army, reportedly aided by Cuban advisers, appears to have had much success in cutting off the contras' infiltration routes in northern Nicaragua, according to diplomatic and military sources.

But critics charge that the rebels' leadership lacks a clear strategy for waging a guerrilla war, and that the contras' forces are relatively unaggressive. They note that El Salvador's left-wing guerrillas, with less than half as many combatants and without a sanctuary in a neigh-

boring country, had greater military success.

"There isn't the kind of ideological commitment [within the contras] that you find with Marxist guerrillas," a source familiar with the contras' activities said. The contras apparently prefer to wait in Honduras, where they can buy food easily and send the bills to the U.S. government, rather than return to Nicaragua, where it sometimes is hard to get food, the source said.

Rep. Dave McCurdy (D-Okla.), who played a key role in putting together the congressional majority that approved U.S. aid for the contras last year, said in an interview, "A number of us are disappointed in both the military and political progress of the contras."

He said that the contras did not espouse a clear political program, other than opposition to the Sandinistas, and that their large "task force" units of several hundred combatants were inappropriate for a guerrilla war.

"I don't sense, as they're structured and organized, that they can be a military threat. What you need are highly disciplined, tightly unified units that have different tactics than they have had in the past," McCurdy said. Contra leaders say their forces have begun traveling in smaller units to deny easy targets to the Sandinistas' helicopters.

Both the contras' leaders and U.S. officials said the rebels' main problem is a lack of supplies, and particularly of high-quality combat boots. As a result, they said, it is critical that Congress approve fresh aid for the contras as the Reagan administration has proposed.

"At the end of September, and in October, we began to feel the impact of a lack of supplies," said Indalecio Rodriguez, a member of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force's seven-member directorate. Other contra leaders, including military

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